

**Document 8.2 “A” A European Christian in China - Marco Polo****Background Information:**

Of all the travelers along the Silk Road network, the most well-known and celebrated, at least in the West, was Marco Polo (1254–1324). Born and raised in the prosperous commercial city-state of Venice in what is now northern Italy, Marco Polo was a member of a family prominent in the long-distance trade of the Mediterranean and Black sea regions. At the age of seventeen, Marco accompanied his father and an uncle on an immense journey across Eurasia which by 1275 brought the Polos to China, recently conquered by the Mongols. It was, in fact, the relative peace which the Mongols had created in their huge transcontinental empire that facilitated the Polos’ journey. For the next seventeen years, they lived in China, where they were employed in minor administrative positions by Khublai Khan, the country’s Mongol ruler. During these years, Marco Polo apparently traveled widely within China where he gathered material for the book about his travels, which he dictated to a friend after returning home in 1295.

Marco Polo’s journey and the book that described it, generally known as *The Travels of Marco Polo*, were important elements of the larger process by which an emerging West European civilization reached out to and became aware of the older civilizations of the East. Christopher Columbus carried a marked-up copy of the book on his transatlantic journeys, believing that he was seeking by sea the places Marco Polo had visited by land. Some modern scholars are skeptical about parts of Marco Polo’s report, and a few even question whether he ever got to China at all, largely because he omitted any mention of certain prominent features of Chinese life, for example, foot binding, the Great Wall, and tea drinking. Most historians, however, accept the basic outlines of Marco Polo’s account, even as they notice exaggerations as well as an inflated perception of his own role within China. The selection that follows conveys Marco Polo’s description of the city of Hangzhou, which he referred to as Kinsay. At the time of Marco Polo’s visit, it was among the largest cities in the world.

**Consider these questions as you read:**

1. How would you describe Marco Polo’s impressions of the city? What did he notice? What surprised him?
2. Why did Marco Polo describe the city as “the finest and the noblest in the world”?
3. What marks his account of the city as that of a foreigner and a Christian?
4. What evidence of China’s engagement with a wider world does this account offer?

**MARCO POLO****The Travels of Marco Polo - 1299**

The city is beyond dispute the finest and the noblest in the world. In this we shall speak according to the written statement which the Queen of this Realm sent to Bayan, the [Mongol] conqueror of the country for transmission to the Great Kaan, in order that he might be aware of the surpassing grandeur of the city and might be moved to save it from destruction or injury. I will tell you all the truth as it was set down in that document. For truth it was, as the said Messer Marco Polo at a later date was able to witness with his own eyes...

First and foremost, then, the document stated the city of Kinsay to be so great that it hath an hundred miles of compass. And there are in it 12,000 bridges of stone... [Most scholars consider these figures a considerable exaggeration.] And though the bridges be so high, the approaches are so well contrived that carts and horses do cross them.

The document aforesaid also went on to state that there were in this city twelve guilds of the different crafts, and that each guild had 12,000 houses in the occupation of its workmen. Each of these houses contains at least twelve men, whilst some contain twenty and some forty... And yet all these craftsmen had full occupation, for many other cities of the kingdom are supplied from this city with what they require.

The document aforesaid also stated that the number and wealth of the merchants, and the amount of goods that passed through their hands, were so enormous that no man could form a just estimate thereof. And I should have told you with regard to those masters of the different crafts who are at the head of such houses as I have mentioned, that neither they nor their wives ever touch a piece of work with their own hands, but live as nicely and delicately as if they were kings and queens. The wives indeed are most dainty and angelical creatures! Moreover it was an ordinance laid down by the King that every man should follow his father’s business and no other, no matter if he possessed 100,000 bezants.°

Inside the city there is a Lake...and all round it are erected beautiful palaces and mansions, of the richest and most exquisite structure that you can imagine, belonging to the nobles of the city. There are also on its shores many abbeys and churches of the Idolaters [Buddhists]. In the middle of the Lake are two Islands, on each of which stands a rich, beautiful, and spacious edifice, furnished in such style as to seem fit for the palace of an Emperor. And when any one of the citizens desired to hold a marriage feast, or to give any other entertainment, it used to be done at one of these palaces. And everything would be found there ready to order, such as silver plate, trenchers, and dishes, napkins and table-cloths, and whatever else was needful... Sometimes there would be at these palaces an hundred different parties; some holding a banquet, others celebrating a wedding...in so well-ordered a manner that one party was never in the way of another...

Both men and women are fair and comely, and for the most part clothe themselves in silk, so vast is the supply of that material, both from the whole district of Kinsay, and from the imports by traders from other provinces. And you must know they eat every kind of flesh, even that of dogs and other unclean beasts, which nothing would induce a Christian to eat...

You must know also that the city of Kinsay has some 3,000 baths, the water of which is supplied by springs. They are hot baths, and the people take great delight in them, frequenting them several times a month, for they are very cleanly in their persons. They are the finest and largest baths in the world...

And the Ocean Sea comes within twenty-five miles of the city at a place called Ganfu, where there is a town and an excellent haven, with a vast amount of shipping which is engaged in the traffic to and from India and other foreign parts, exporting and importing many kinds of wares, by which the city benefits...

I repeat that everything appertaining to this city is on so vast a scale, and the Great Kaan's yearly revenues therefrom are so immense, that it is not easy even to put it in writing...

In this part are the ten principal markets, though besides these there are a vast number of others in the different parts of the town... [T]oward the [market] squares are built great houses of stone, in which the merchants from India and other foreign parts store their wares, to be handy for the markets. In each of the squares is held a market three days in the week, frequented by 40,000 or 50,000 persons, who bring thither for sale every possible necessary of life, so that there is always an ample supply of every kind of meat and game...

Those markets make a daily display of every kind of vegetables and fruits...[V]ery good raisins are brought from abroad, and wine likewise... From the Ocean Sea also come daily supplies of fish in great quantity, brought twenty-five miles up the river... All the ten market places are encompassed by lofty houses, and below these are shops where all sorts of crafts are carried on, and all sorts of wares are on sale, including spices and jewels and pearls. Some of these shops are entirely devoted to the sale of wine made from rice and spices, which is constantly made fresh, and is sold very cheap. Certain of the streets are occupied by the women of the town, who are in such a number that I dare not say what it is. They are found not only in the vicinity of the market places, where usually a quarter is assigned to them, but all over the city. They exhibit themselves splendidly attired and abundantly perfumed, in finely garnished houses, with trains of waiting-women. These women are extremely accomplished in all the arts of allurement, and readily adapt their conversation to all sorts of persons, insomuch that strangers who have once tasted their attractions seem to get bewitched, and are so taken with their blandishments and their fascinating ways that they never can get these out of their heads...

Other streets are occupied by the Physicians, and by the Astrologers, who are also teachers of reading and writing; and an infinity of other professions have their places round about those squares. In each of the squares there are two great palaces facing one another, in which are established the officers appointed by the King to decide differences arising between merchants, or other inhabitants of the quarter...

The crowd of people that you meet here at all hours...is so vast that no one would believe it possible that victuals enough could be provided for their consumption, unless they should see how, on every market-day, all those squares are thronged and crammed with purchasers, and with the traders who have brought in stores of provisions by land or water; and everything they bring in is disposed of...

The natives of the city are men of peaceful character, both from education and from the example of their kings, whose disposition was the same. They know nothing of handling arms, and keep none in their houses. You hear of no feuds or noisy quarrels or dissensions of any kind among them. Both in their commercial dealings and in their manufactures they are thoroughly honest and truthful, and there is such a degree of good will and neighborly attachment among both men and women that you would take the people who live in the same street to be all one family.

And this familiar intimacy is free from all jealousy or suspicion of the conduct of their women. These they treat with the greatest respect, and a man who should presume to make loose proposals to a married woman

would be regarded as an infamous rascal. They also treat the foreigners who visit them for the sake of trade with great cordiality and entertain them in the most winning manner, affording them every help and advice on their business. But on the other hand they hate to see soldiers, and not least those of the Great Kaan's garrisons, regarding them as the cause of their having lost their native kings and lords.

<sup>o</sup>**bezant**: a Byzantine gold coin.

Source: *The Book of Sir Marco Polo the Venetian Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, 3rd ed., translated and edited by Henry Yule, revised by Henri Cordier (London: John Murray, 1903), vol. 2:185–206.

## Document 8.2 “B” An Arab Muslim in West Africa - Ibn Battuta

### Background Information:

For most of the postclassical millennium, the world of Islam was far more extensive than that of Christendom. Nothing more effectively conveys both the extent and the cultural unity of the Islamic world than the travels of Ibn Battuta (1304–1368). Born in Morocco, this learned Arab scholar traversed nearly 75,000 miles during his extraordinary journeys, which took him to Spain, Anatolia, West and East Africa, Arabia, Iraq, Persia, Central and Southeast Asia, India, and China. He traveled at various times as a pilgrim, as a religious seeker, as a legal scholar, and frequently in the company of Muslim merchants. Remarkably, almost all of his extensive travels occurred within the realm of Islam, where he moved among people who shared his faith and often his Arabic language. Marco Polo, by contrast, had felt himself constantly an outsider, “a stranger in a strange land,” for he was traveling almost everywhere beyond the borders of Christendom. But as a visitor from a more-established Islamic society, Ibn Battuta was often highly critical of the quality of Islamic observance in the frontier regions of the faith.

One such frontier region was West Africa, where a new civilization was taking shape, characterized by large empires such as Mali, a deep involvement in trans-Saharan commerce, and the gradual assimilation of Islam (see Map 8.3 and pp. 348–51 and 492–94). The new faith had been introduced by North African Muslim traders and had found a growing acceptance, particularly in the urban centers, merchant communities, and ruling classes of West African kingdoms. On the last of his many journeys, Ibn Battuta crossed the Sahara Desert with a traders' caravan to visit Mali in 1352. Upon returning home the following year, he dictated his recollections and experiences to a scribe, producing a valuable account of this West African civilization in the fourteenth century.

### Consider these questions as you read:

1. How would you describe Ibn Battuta's impression of Mali? What surprised or shocked him? What did he appreciate?
2. What does Ibn Battuta's description of his visit to Mali reveal about his own attitudes and his image of himself?
3. What might historians learn from this document about the nature and extent of Islam's penetration in this West African empire?
4. What elements of older and continuing West African cultural traditions are evident in the document?
5. What specifically does Ibn Battuta find shocking about the women he encounters on his travels in West Africa?
6. What indications of Mali's economic involvement with a wider world are evident in the document?

## IBN BATTUTA - Travels in Asia and Africa 1354

Thus we reached the town of Iwalatan<sup>o</sup> after a journey from Sijilmasa of two months to a day. Iwalatan is the northernmost province of the blacks... The garments of its inhabitants, most of whom belong to the Massufa tribe, are of fine Egyptian fabrics.

Their women are of surpassing beauty, and are shown more respect than the men. The state of affairs amongst these people is indeed extraordinary. Their men show no signs of jealousy whatever; no one claims descent from his father, but on the contrary from his mother's brother. A person's heirs are his sister's sons, not his own sons. This is a thing which I have seen nowhere in the world except among the Indians of Malabar. But those are heathens; these people are Muslims, punctilious in observing the hours of prayer, studying books of law, and memorizing the Koran. Yet their women show no bashfulness before men and do not veil themselves, though they are assiduous in attending the prayers.

The women there have “friends” and “companions” amongst the men outside their own families, and the men in the same way have “companions” amongst the women of other families. A man may go into his house and find his wife entertaining her “companion,” but he takes no objection to it. One day at Iwalatan I went into the qadi's<sup>o</sup> house, after asking his permission to enter, and found with him a young woman of remarkable beauty. When I saw her I was shocked and turned to go out, but she laughed at me, instead of being overcome by shame, and the qadi said to me “Why are you going out? She is my companion.” I was amazed at their conduct, for he was a theologian and a pilgrim [to Mecca] to boot...

When I decided to make the journey to Malli,<sup>o</sup> which is reached in twenty-four days from Iwalatan if the traveler pushes on rapidly, I hired a guide from the Massufa—for there is no necessity to travel in a company on account of the safety of that road—and set out with three of my companions...

A traveler in this country carries no provisions, whether plain food or seasonings, and neither gold nor silver. He takes nothing but pieces of salt and glass ornaments, which the people call beads, and some aromatic goods. When he comes to a village the womenfolk of the blacks bring out millet, milk, chickens, pulped lotus fruit, rice, “funi” (a grain resembling mustard seed, from which “kuskusu”<sup>o</sup> and gruel are made), and pounded haricot beans...

Thus I reached the city of Malli, the capital of the king of the blacks. I stopped at the cemetery and went to the quarter occupied by the whites, where I asked for Muhammad ibn al-Faqih. I found that he had hired a house for me and went there... I met the qadi of Malli, ‘Abd ar-Rahman, who came to see me; he is a black, a pilgrim [to Mecca], and a man of fine character. I met also the interpreter Dugha, who is one of the principal men among the blacks. All these persons sent me hospitality gifts of food and treated me with the utmost generosity...

The sultan<sup>o</sup> of Malli is Mansa Sulayman... He is a miserly king, not a man from whom one might hope for a rich present. It happened that I spent these two months without seeing him, on account of my illness. Later on he held a banquet... to which the commanders, doctors, qadi, and preacher were invited, and I went along with them. Reading-desks were brought in, and the Koran was read through, then they prayed for our master Abu’l-Hasan<sup>o</sup> and also for Mansa Sulayman.

When the ceremony was over I went forward and saluted Mansa Sulayman... When I withdrew, the [sultan’s] hospitality gift was sent to me... I stood up thinking... that it consisted of robes of honor and money, and lo!, it was three cakes of bread, and a piece of beef fried in native oil, and a calabash of sour curds. When I saw this I burst out laughing, and thought it a most amazing thing that they could be so foolish and make so much of such a paltry matter.

On certain days the sultan holds audiences in the palace yard, where there is a platform under a tree, with three steps; this they call the “pempi.” It is carpeted with silk and has cushions placed on it. [Over it] is raised the umbrella, which is a sort of pavilion made of silk, surmounted by a bird in gold, about the size of a falcon. The sultan comes out of a door in a corner of the palace, carrying a bow in his hand and a quiver on his back. On his head he has a golden skullcap, bound with a gold band which has narrow ends shaped like knives, more than a span in length. His usual dress is a velvety red tunic, made of the European fabrics called “mutanfas.” The sultan is preceded by his musicians, who carry gold and silver guimbris<sup>o</sup>, and behind him come three hundred armed slaves. He walks in a leisurely fashion, affecting a very slow movement, and even stops from time to time. On reaching the pempi he stops and looks round the assembly, then ascends it in the sedate manner of a preacher ascending a mosque-pulpit. As he takes his seat the drums, trumpets, and bugles are sounded. Three slaves go out at a run to summon the sovereign’s deputy and the military commanders, who enter and sit down. Two saddled and bridled horses are brought, along with two goats, which they hold to serve as a protection against the evil eye...?

The blacks are of all people the most submissive to their king and the most abject in their behavior before him... If he summons any of them while he is holding an audience in his pavilion, the person summoned takes off his clothes and puts on worn garments, removes his turban and dons a dirty skullcap, and enters with his garments and trousers raised knee-high. He goes forward in an attitude of humility and dejection and knocks the ground hard with his elbows, then stands with bowed head and bent back listening to what he says. If anyone addresses the king and receives a reply from him, he uncovers his back and throws dust over his head and back, for all the world like a bather splashing himself with water...

On feast-days..., the poets come in. Each of them is inside a figure resembling a thrush, made of feathers, and provided with a wooden head with a red beak, to look like a thrush’s head. They stand in front of the sultan in this ridiculous makeup and recite their poems. I was told that their poetry is a kind of sermonizing in which they say to the sultan: “This pempi which you occupy was that whereon sat this king and that king, and such and such were this one’s noble actions and such and such the other’s. So do you too do good deeds whose memory will outlive you.”... I was told that this practice is a very old custom amongst them, prior to the introduction of Islam, and that they have kept it up.

The blacks possess some admirable qualities. They are seldom unjust, and have a greater abhorrence of injustice than any other people. Their sultan shows no mercy to anyone who is guilty of the least act of it. There is complete security in their country. Neither traveler nor inhabitant in it has anything to fear from robbers or men of violence. They do not confiscate the property of any white man who dies in their country, even if it be uncounted wealth. On the contrary, they give it into the charge of some trustworthy person among the whites, until the rightful heir takes possession of it. They are careful to observe the hours of prayer, and assiduous in attending them in congregations, and in bringing up their children to them.

On Fridays, if a man does not go early to the mosque, he cannot find a corner to pray in, on account of the crowd. It is a custom of theirs to send each man his boy [to the mosque] with his prayer-mat; the boy spreads it out for his master in a place befitting him [and remains on it] until he comes to the mosque...

Another of their good qualities is their habit of wearing clean white garments on Fridays. Even if a man has nothing but an old worn shirt, he washes it and cleans it, and wears it to the Friday service. Yet another is their

zeal for learning the Koran by heart... I visited the qadi in his house on the day of the festival. His children were chained up, so I said to him, "Will you not let them loose?" He replied, "I shall not do so until they learn the Koran by heart."

Among their bad qualities are the following. The women servants, slave-girls, and young girls go about in front of everyone naked, without a stitch of clothing on them. Women go into the sultan's presence naked and without coverings, and his daughters also go about naked. Then there is their custom of putting dust and ashes on their heads, as a mark of respect, and the grotesque ceremonies we have described when the poets recite their verses. Another reprehensible practice among many of them is the eating of carrion, dogs, and asses.

I went on...to Gawgaw°, which is a large city on the Nile°, and one of the finest towns in the land of the blacks. It is also one of their biggest and best-provisioned towns, with rice in plenty, milk, and fish... The buying and selling of its inhabitants is done with cowry shells, and the same is the case at Malli. I stayed there about a month.

°**Iwalatan:** Walata. °**qadi:** judge. °**Malli:** the city of Mali. °**kuskusu:** couscous. °**sultan:** ruler.

°**Abu'l-Hasan:** the sultan of Morocco. °**guimbris:** two-stringed guitars. °**Gawgaw:** Gogo.

°**Nile:** Niger. The Niger River was long regarded by outsiders as a tributary of The Nile.

Source: Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325–1354*, translated and edited by H. A. R. Gibb (London: Broadway House, 1929), 319–34.